SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO

BY H. BEDFORD-JONES

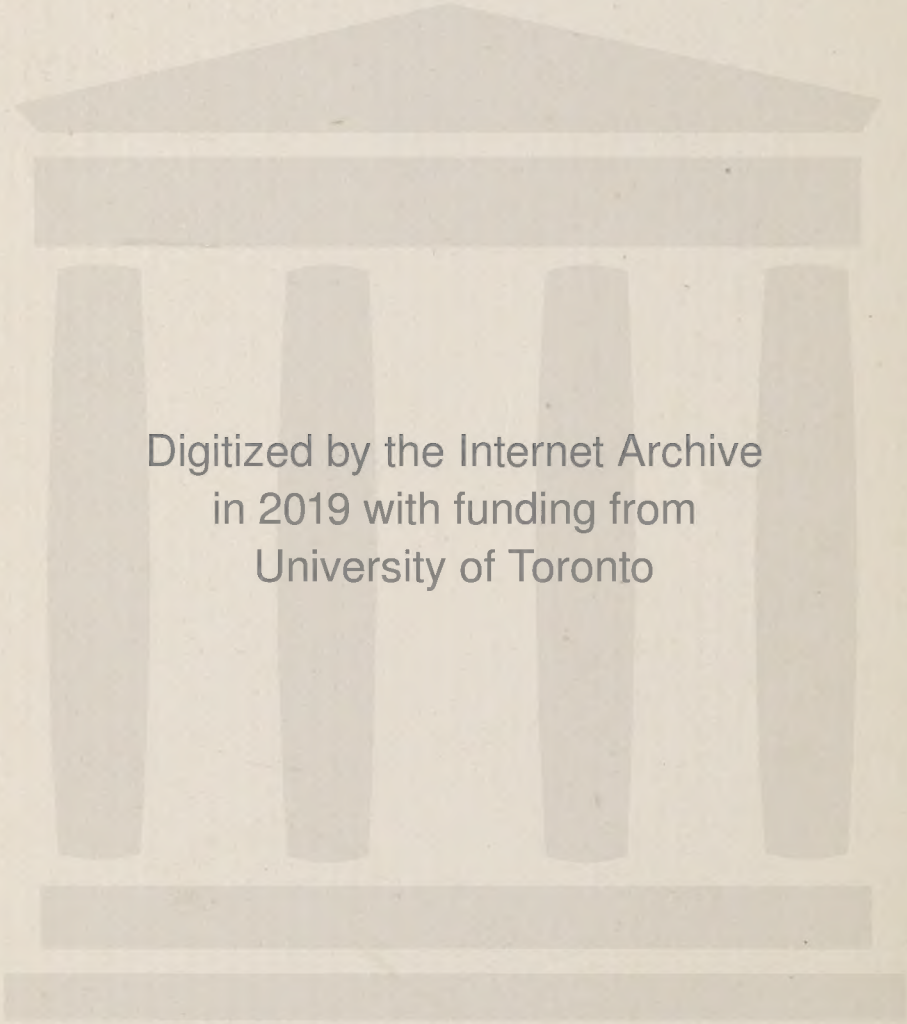
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The Man

THE STORY OF MISION SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO

BY

H. BEDFORD-JONES

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A man was famous according as he had lifted up axes upon the thick trees.

But now they break down the carved work thereof with axes and hammers.

FOREWORD

The writer has endeavored herein to express more than bare facts; to express something of the inner vision of this place --- something of the spirituality yet lingering upon the rain-streaked walls and the crumbling arches.

This volume is but one man's viewpoint. Its only ambition is an interpretation of the strange individuality which clings to these ruins today.

The "Man" of this book has no knowledge of this writing; nor would he perhaps approve the introduction of personal elements --- but what matter? His labor has put beauty and utility in the stead of ruin and neglect; the world owes him a meed of appreciation. He desires it not, yet it will come to him as inevitably as will a Higher appreciation.

To him I owe thanks for assistance and information, nor could I find fitter dedication than to ascribe and inscribe this volume to

St. John O'Sullivan
Genio Loci

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THE ADOBE

From the earth they made me,
A grey adobe slab;
By my fellows laid me,
Sun-baked, ugly, drab.
From the dust they called me
Who had been a clod,
Plastered me and walled me ---
Set me to serve God!

THE ADOBE

✠

OUT of the south came Junípero Serra the Franciscan, conquering the land with faith, a Cross, and an adobe brick.

California's Via Crucis was milestoned with adobes. This was a land all but treeless; the most natural and easily made material was the sun-baked clay brick. Indeed, it was the only constructive material at the disposal of the first padres.

Misión San Juan Capistrano was founded October 30, 1775. Eight days later came news of the native uprising at San Diego. In all haste Fray Lasuén buried the two mission bells and fled.

In the following year came Padre Serra the Fundator in person, and re-established the work. He chose a new and better site, between the Trabuco and San Juan creeks, within sight of the sea; and consecrated this foundation November 1, 1776. Then he departed and the work was taken up by his helpers --- Padres Mugartégui and Amúrrio.

✠

NO monastery was this place, no secluded spot for meditation and repose; but a school of industrial and manual training where the Indians were taught to know God, and to serve Him in love. Here was preached the mystery of service -- to borrow honest Will Comfort's phrase; the mystery of creative labor, of honesty in one's handiwork. The first result of this was the adobe.

Adobe bricks are excellent things in themselves, but they must be protected from the rains. In a country where every scrap of material must be formed from the raw earth-givings, such protection means labor. The padres

labored; their mission was built from adobe and tiles, rawhide and mortar, reeds and boulders.

In the Cañada del Orno, "little cañon of the oven," just north of the mission ruins, the remains of the kilns may still be seen. Here were made tiles of many shapes, but all of the same tender red.

Some were square, and these were used to floor the corridors; some were oblong, and these went to build the columns and arches, and to roof them; some were regular roofing tiles, curved and fitted to run water. All may be seen in service to this day.

✠

BEFORE the actual building, all things had to be shown to the builders. These neophytes, as the Indian converts were termed, learned to use carts and oxen, to make tiles, to transform into cement and mortar the limestone, so laboriously fetched twelve miles over the hills.

Meantime, food had to be won from the earth and the necessities of life provided. Open ditches and tiled

conduits were run from the streams, forming an extensive irrigation system. Gardens, orchards, and vineyards were laid out and the neophytes were shown how to care for them. Each day the advantages of this site chosen by Fray Serra became more evident.

Gradually the adobe walls went up; and, rising, they enclosed workshops. Neophyte carpenters hewed out ceiling-rafters of sycamore beams, brought from the hills twenty miles away, and carved the quaintly mortised door and window frames. The smithy produced nails, locks, hinges and tools.

Less skilled workers brought tules, reeds from the creek-beds, and cut up rawhide. Tules were laid upon the rafters, bound down and made fast with rawhide, and plastered over. In this fashion were made ceilings.

Day by day the dried adobes took higher form, firmer shape; the walls were from two to seven feet thick. The arches rose around a patio of an acre in area, each side being about two hundred feet in length, but no two sides being exactly parallel.

Separated from the arches by a

roofed, open corridor were the buildings, running completely around the patio. Not all were erected at once, but there was no haste. All eternity lay ahead for this work.

Were a stone laid, were a bolt set, were a nail driven — it was done for ever. Here was no careless construction, no shoddy work; these men labored not for men, but served God.

Until the adobes returned to dust again, this place would endure.

✠

TWENTY years passed. Hugely had the mission prospered. Neophytes, who were now known as San Juaneños, dwelt by the hundred in their own adobe houses, just across the plaza.

Besides the high large church, with its choir-loft and softly tinted walls, there were shops in which were made soap, blankets, candles, sombreros and leather goods.

In the southwest corner was a flat roof for drying fruits. The northeast and north buildings were store-houses for grains, hides, oil and tallow. At

the west were the vats and smithy, the oil and wine presses.

From the west front were brought out more arches; an extension of the buildings struck forth into the plaza. Here lay the store-houses, school, and at the end, the quarters and arched bell of the lazy garrison.

Vineyards, orchards and gardens flourished greatly. Thousands of cattle roamed the hills, and the San Juan horses were famous in the land.[1] The mission had outlying rancherías, settlements of San Juaneños who saw to the crops and cattle --- and who doubled the talents in their keeping.

No more clay bricks lay baking in the sun.

✠

DURING those twenty years of service and growth, a vision had been in the forming.

All that could be done with adobe, had been done. Massive walls, arches, all manner of structures --- these were finished. But already the padres had begun to look ahead. Not theirs was the ability to rest content with having

[1] Appendix A

done enough. Men never do enough for God.

Twenty miles away in the mountains were sycamores. Near the Misión Vieja, Fray Lasuén's old foundation six miles up the cañon, was a fine store of sandstone. Twelve miles distant was limestone. At the ocean shore were boulders and sand.

With the close of the year 1796, the padres saw their vision clearly. They began to make diamond-shaped tiles, and sent for a stone-mason.

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✠



Out of the quarry cut and laid,
Brown hands wrought me, unafraid;
  Carved me with symbols that had no name,
  Set me to hold a high arch-frame.
Vanished are they with all their race
Yet here dwell I in my given place;
  Washed of the rain, burnt of the sun,
  Waiting with God till the years be done.

THE KEYSTONE

✠

GOD has given us wealth and workmen and eager hearts. Now let us put our talents to account in His service!"

In this spirit the two mission fathers obtained their stone-mason and set to work on a nine-years' contract with God.

On February 2, 1797, the task was begun. This was the vision — a great church all of stone, the grandest house of worship in the Californias. Some of the Baja California churches were marvelous things, carven and dighted with precious gifts; but they were small. This was to be large, beautiful, splendid in its solemnity and

grandeur.

They laid it out in the form of a Latin cross, 175 by 80 feet. The walls were to be two yards thick, all of stone and cement; the roof was to be formed by seven bovedas, or domes; the entire building was to be one solid mass of pure masonry.

So the work began.

✠

WEEK after week, month after month, year after year, the purpled hills looked down upon moving files of men, women and children.

Carretas, or ox-carts of two wheels, formed a constant line between the new mission and the Misión Vieja, where lay the sandstone quarries; but not carretas alone. The San Juaneños carried stones on their heads; even the children came bearing stones --- twelve miles back and forth, day after day and year after year. Although the neophytes were numbered by the hundreds, the walls were six feet thick.

In the workshops was redoubled toil and labor. The weavers, oil and wine makers, cordwainers, clothiers and candle-

fashioners must continue work as usual. All regular business must go on, for the mission was self-supporting.

Out in the sun stood the stone-mason with his neophyte pupils, teaching these apprentices the mystery of the keystone, and the carving thereof. The keystones of the tiled arches had been tiles. Now this arch-key took on new meaning and importance.

From the kilns came the tiles, diamond shaped, for the flooring of the new church alone. Month by month uprose the walls, as endless processions wended in, some from the quarries, some from the ocean, othersome from the mountains or limestone cliffs. Concrete was mixed and laid. Slowly the massive walls drew nearer to heaven.

✠

AND the spirit of it all lay in the keystones and lintels, the cornices and capitals. With time, the apprentices became master masons; beneath their hands the rough ashlars were perfected, and in turn these perfect ashlars grew to living jewels of their craft.

For they carved these, not with em-

blems of the faith, but with strange flowing symbols deeply chiseled and carefully balanced. In those symbols was something of the pagan, something which the good padres assuredly did not inspire. Perhaps the inspiration came from the quivering sunlight, the rounded hills, the far blue line of the ocean.

The door lintels, carved in conservative cruciform designs, were strikingly different and in their way no less beautiful.

But in the keystones were sermons.

✠

THREE years passed, and the century ended with the work only one third completed. Still the hundreds of laborers went about their tasks, while the padres planned and directed, yet without neglecting their spiritual trestle-boards.

Gone was the stone-mason, leaving a greater genius than his own with the pupils of his teaching. The bluish grey sandstone still came from the quarry, the carvers still wrought with the slow patience of their race. Neither gaudy nor baroque was their work; they had learned temperance, prudence, fortitude and justice,

these entering largely into their labor.

Another three years crept on. Fray Vicente Fuster went the way of all flesh and the vacancy was filled by one José Faura. What mattered names? These men lived for the salvation of souls, and to the glory of God.

Somewhere within the walls rests Brother Vicente, his grave unknown, unmarked; yet his memory is more enduring than bronze.

✠

SLOWLY the great edifice drew upward. The lofty campanile began to rise — up and up, ever climbing skyward, until it could be discerned for ten miles; the sound of its high bells carried even farther.

Other three years passed, but now more swiftly. The floor was laid, the carven doors and windows were placed, the last capital and column were set in their concrete beds, the plaster was drawn over the rough walls, and the stone-chips were cleared from the patio.

Not yet was the task completed, however. Remained some delicate gilding and tinting with soft ochres and

the tender sheen of copper-ground ship's paint. The dull colorings blended most exquisitely with the deep red of the tiles, the creamy white of the plaster, until the high-towering transept and sanctuary were gorgeous in soft harmony.

It was finished.

✠

NOW came a splendid and notable company wending unto the Misión San Juan Capistrano.

Came Don José Juaquín de Arrellaga, bringing his officers and soldiers from all the presidios; he was governor of the province and a very worthy gentleman. Came Fray Estevan Tapis, president of the missions. Came many brethren of the Order from their scattered posts: San Gabriel Archangel, San Luis Rey de Francia, Santa Barbara, and others. Came neophytes from the neighbor missions, with Spaniards and halfbreeds, in great numbers.

To receive them were the builders, the San Juaneños; and Padres Faura and Santiago, whose labors had brought to completion this work.

Thus at last was the great edifice

consecrated; and, save to the Supreme Architect, there was no church debt.

The date was September 7, 1806; of the work the ninth year.



THE HIGH BELLS

Unto the sky
Tower we afar,
Calling on high,
Calling men nigh ---
    Nigh unto prayer.
Over the worn
Desert-land's glare,
To sundrift and star
Our call is upborne,
    "Come ye to prayer!"
Ever we cry,
Never we cease,
    "Come ye to prayer,
Here is God's peace!"

THE HIGH BELLS

✠

VITALLY important to the work of the mission, and symbolic to Indian hearts of all for which the mission stood, were its bells.

The daily régime, in fact the entire mission life, was under the regulation of the bells. Meals, worship, labor --- for each occupation of brethren and neophytes the bells were struck. Was not each act a service of God?

Today, those bells, four in number, hang in a low wall; the largest is dated 1796, and its inscription is in honor of Padres Fuster and Santiago. Next in size is that holding a bold proclamation: "Ruelas made me, and my name is San Juan, 1796."

Who was this Ruelas? We do not know. The one man who left his name graven upon this structure, he alone has been totally forgotten.

These two bells may have been recast from those buried in 1775 by Padre Lasuén; but according to local traditions the buried bells were never found.

Dated "San Antonio, 1804" and "San Rafael, 1804", the two smaller bells that hang here were evidently sent from other missions to enrich the campanile of the great new church.

✠

HARSH and strident, the bells rang afar, clanging birth and marriage, sorrow and toil, worship and death. So high stood the campanile that it could be seen from Los Alisos, ten miles distant. And for six years the high bells swung there, until the Master's hand touched upon them.

The builders of the church departed, and in their places walked Padres Francisco Suñer and Josef Barona --- men sent hither to meet heart-rending ferial days, and one of them destined to suffer at the hands of evil men.

December 8, 1812, came and went again. For us who look back upon a vanished era, it is a day of questioning.

It was the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

✠

THE first mass was for adults; thus, no children were in the church. Why? Was this by chance?

The service began. The tongues of the bells were replaced by chanting; the Indian flutists, drummers and violinists lifted the voices into resounding cadences; Vancouver's barrel-organ piped throatily.[1]

Candles blazed; at the altar was the padre, wearing the white-and-gold chasuble which had come from Mexico City. Wrought by pious hands, sent to some older mission, it had been outworn and replaced and sent on, at last reaching San Juan, still stiff and gorgeous. And it is there now.

The offertory was finished. In the campanile two boys were ringing the bells for second mass. The bronze tongues were clanging, clanging --- why

1 Appendix B

should it have befallen at that instant?

For of a sudden the vaulted domes were rent asunder.

✠

WITH the wave-like motion of the walls, the doors jammed; above, the roof cracked open to the blue sky. Although the celebrant motioned the people toward the sacristy door, not all could obey.

From above came a rush of rubble as the walls were ripped asunder and the domes fell. Dust-darkness, shrieks .... chaos. And then one tremendous crash that drowned all else; the proud campanile had fallen!

Instead of burying all beneath its ruins, it fell away from the church, out into the plaza. Why?

✠

AFTER two days of searching and labor, forty bodies were recovered; others were not recovered. The padres buried the dead, whose names may to this day be read in the records.

Nine years in building, the church

had served God six years when it was shattered. The sanotuary and transept alone were unruined, unharmed, left intact. Why?

Other structures suffered little; the padres took up the daily round anew, not trying to rebuild. In after times such efforts were made, but came to naught. Again the mission prospered, dealt largely in hides and grain and cattle; perhaps the brethren cherished ambitions, yet in the days of prosperity that followed the earthquake, the church was not rebuilt. Why?

These queries we cannot answer.

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THE COYOTE

All the night is deep and still;
Coyote, do you hear the thunder growling?
Stars fling silver over the hill
Where the gaunt grey beast is prowling,
Up at the star-flecked night-sky howling,
While men watch not but sleep their fill ----
Oye, oye!
When the dawn comes grey
Coyote, do you hear the thunder growling?

THE COYOTE

✠

AFTER these things fell evil days upon the place, and yet more evil men.

Always had Mexico eyed greedily the rich Alta California missions, posting soldiers at each one and claiming civil authority. The cholo soldiers did as they pleased, defying the padres, and at San Juan they most grievously maltreated Padre Barona.

Also, these cholos brought vices and drunkeness among the Indians; no good thing came out of Mexico. The neophytes were thrown into the hands of the flesh and the devil. Simple souls were they, not hard to lead astray; the olden days were gone, and into

their world had come greed.

✠

IN 1833 the missions were finally seized, and San Juan Capistrano was the first to suffer.

The San Juaneños saw the rule pass into new hands; they saw the lands sold off; they saw men casting lots for the sacred vestments; they saw the mission buildings desecrated, and themselves cast adrift.

Later came smallpox and dwelt with them, so that the San Juaneños perished as a people.

Now the coyote comes into the story. Among the Indians was a saying, part of a folk-tale not yet lost: "Oye los truenos, coyote?" Dost hear the thunder, coyote? There is pith in the words.

After many years were the mission buildings, their contents partially intact, restored to their church, through the work of Doña Ysadora Pico de Forster. It was too late to save the neophytes but it was not too late to save the buildings; however, the place was forgotten of the world. Yet, what matter

whether the world remembers?

Years fled, twenty or more. Services were held occasionally. Looters found the place rich; but their hands took amazingly little.

Here were statues, wrought from Spanish woods and decked with gold. Silver candlesticks, torches, crosses and other objects of metal were not lacking. Also, rare paintings and broideries.

✠

SOMEHOW, down the years, the mission held these things unwarded, unlocked. The adobe buildings around the patio crumbled; earth hid the tender red tiles; men quarried materials from the ruins for their own uses. Coyotes howled in the desolate patio; this was the final requiem.

But those remaining of the San Juaneños whispered: "Oye los truenos, coyote?"

The words held significance; not often is thunder heard hereabouts, and a thunderstorm is rare indeed. Perhaps — who knows? — to the Indian mind it typified the voice and action of Deity. But the coyote, like the

temple looter, was the most despicable of all things. "Dost hear the thunder, coyote?" The saying lingered.

Within the mission were desolation and graves, ruin and sadness, neglect and emptiness. Yet, from time to time, God thundered upon the hills.

God does not forget. He was raising up a man to His work.



THE MAN

He heard a solemn anthem swim
Upon the swallows' twittered cries;
The bare brown hills became to him
A shimmer of sun-symphonies;
Athwart the crumbling cloister-shade
An angel's wing limned lanes of light,
And from forgotten graves out-strayed
Low whisperings upon the night.

With adze and plane and rugged beam
He fell to hewing out his dream.

THE MAN

✠

A MAN came to San Juan to die. Smitten by the white plague, he was denied all hope. Since he had but to await death, yet wished to remain in the Divine service, he was sent to the abode of desolation.

I do not think it occured to the Man, or to anyone else, that all his life had been shapen toward his coming here to die. God never makes mistakes.

The Man, burning with a deep spirituality, came here to die. Only forgotten graves awaited him; only the work of the Landmarks Club had saved the mission from total destruction.

Weeds grew shoulder-high in the

holy places. Tourists defaced every wall. With each rain, more of the ruins vanished. The tinted chancel-dome of the high church was covered with swallows' mud nests. The graves of the padres were lost.

✠

THE Man lived among the cholos. Each day, expecting death, he visited the ruins and cleared a space; he uncovered the beautiful tiles, such as remained. At every turn he found wonderful things: fragments of carved work, bits of iron lovingly wrought in the mission forge, scraps of materials rarely worked. All these he saved.

He drew close to the folk, learned their speech, won their love. They told him ancient legends, folk-lore, bits of mission history no one else could have gleaned. And still God thundered upon the hills.

To his surprise the Man did not die. Slowly, as he worked amid the ruins, strength returned to him. The mystery of service now brought him its unsought reward --- a vision.

Ruined, despoiled, the old mission

endured above those who had laid it low. In itself it was a vision; only where there is no vision do the people perish. The Man beheld here a life-work; because he had this vision he did not perish but took up the task.

Through what doubt and despair he struggled, none other can know. Often his vision seemed destroyed, as difficulties loomed larger. Each forward step seemed to attain new troubles.

But God never makes mistakes. With every scrap of material found, with legend and story to guide him, the Man set to work. Other missions had been "restored", slathered with plaster, brick and glass, painted in terrible fervor. But to this task God had sent no restorer. He had sent an artist.

✠

NOW the Man dwelt amid the ruins and became the Padre both in fact and spirit. He, too, hewed sycamore beams for rafters; he, too, carved and mortised his window-frames, after the fashion of those remaining. When he drove a nail, it was a nail

made in the forge.

Among the ruins were scraps of old frescoes. Artists visiting the place saw the Padre's vision. In the rooms he restored they copied the old work, line for line, color for color; not in the ecstasy of creation but in the loving care of service.

The Padre bought new brick and tile. He traded new for old, collecting from the town and ranches much that was valuable in his vision. All such things furthered his labors.

✠

WHENCE came the money for this work? From both ecclesiastical and private sources; let us say, from God.

No hire could buy such labor as the Padre gave to his vision, for his remuneration was not of the earth. Before him lay eternity for this task, and there was no haste. If he laid but one tile each day, and laid it well, he was content.

It was this spirit which made the old world's wonders, and makes the new world wonder. It is rarely found

in this country. Once it was here, indeed, but with the displacement of thoroughness by greed, as a standard of craftmanship, it vanished.

This spirit made the rugs of Persia, the Flemish buildings, the bronze-craft of China, the illuminations which Irish monks taught the schoolmen of Europe. Rugs, buildings, bronzes, illuminations --- these are made no more in the old spirit; they are made but to perish, for their makers have no vision. But at San Juan Capistrano the spirit lingers.

✠

FOR years the mission was desolate and abandoned, visionless. Its people perished and vandals held it at their mercy. Yet the spirit of the padres abode in the place where they had served; then came the Padre. In him the old spirit revived, and the ancient vision. Every stone and carving and crumbling fresco cried out to him; Adobe and Keystone and Bell carried to him their message.

Under the spell of his vision, ruin and destruction evolved into beauty and

service. Nor did he serve the dead only, for children sat at his feet and learned. His was the legacy of human fragments in the despised cholo, the halfbreed, the Mexican and Indian.

With such fragments he builded. In him they saw, not the alien, but the Padre whose soul housed veneration and deep kindliness, and a vision. They answered to the vision of their fathers.

The townfolk jeered because he traded new bricks for old, made nails in the forge, left his new doors bare until he could get the paint used by the padres. As the fragments, human and divine, upgrew beneath his hand, the scoffing ceased.

✠

AND today the old place is alive. It is alive with its ancient beauty, alive with graves and ruins, alive with its rebirth. Its people are not perishing but are thriving. Tourist vandals have been turned into paying guests.

Never will the mission be restored to its pristine grandeur; and it is better so. No longer are neophytes at

hand to work in shop and field, no longer do its cattle roam the hills, no longer does the land need it as a center of industry and agriculture. The land needs it only as the house of God. Each crumbled arch, each delicate key-stone, bears a spiritual message.

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SAN Juan does not lack relics of more material interest --- Padre Serra's book of the dead, a letter writ by Fray Crespi before San Diego was founded, ancient silver and vessels and paintings.

The Padre, too, has great store of tales and legends drawn from the hearts of his people; and these he will some day, perhaps, make into a book.

He will do so --- five, ten, twenty years hence. Why hurry? Who serves God, not man, finds a calm poise in life; to each day some task, but God sets the pace.

Perhaps this, after all, is the greatest lesson.

FINIS

Appendix A

Tradition informs us that among the types of horses were:

sabino	--	tortoise-shell
tordillo	--	gray
palomino	--	buff, white tail

The Padre has a more complete list. Whether these are purely local names, I am unable to say.

Appendix B

"Vancouver gave Father Lasuén, of the San Juan Capistrano Mission, a barrel organ for his church." — Smythe, Hist. of San Diego, p. 84. I can find no other mention of this instrument.

Here ends The Story
of Misión San Juan
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